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In 'vesting' in Warwick's K-9s



K-9: Their kindness also allowed Patrolman Paul Wells to vest his WPD K-9, Fox. Jessica Botelho

[Jessica Botelho](#)

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To the delight of the Warwick Police Department, two Massachusetts women recently rallied to raise funds in order for WPD Patrolman Aaron Steere and Patrolman Paul Wells, both K-9 handlers, to each acquire a bulletproof vest for their German Shepherds.

Bulletproof vests are important to keep police officers safe and vital to protect the K-9s that help them solve serious crimes. Costing at least \$1,000 apiece, K-9 vests don't come cheap.

Through the generosity of Vested Interest in K-9s, Inc., a non-profit organization founded by Sandy Marcal in 2009, Steere was able to vest his dog Viking, while Wells was able to vest his dog Fox via HeatherFest, an annual musical event Heather McKibben hosts at her home the first Sunday after Labor Day in Norton, Mass.

Viking's vest was donated in memory of Ivan, a Massachusetts dog that recently passed away, while Fox's vest was donated in memory of McKibben's beloved dog, Maddie, who died during summer 2011.

The women work independently from one another, but McKibben cited Vested Interest in K-9s, Inc. as a beneficiary, and together donated more than \$2,000, plus additional funds to cover embroidery fees. Further, they raised enough money at the event for a third vest, which went to a K-9 in Massachusetts.

To honor the women, as well as the dogs, the WPD will hold a vesting ceremony Oct. 11 at 10:30 a.m.

"These people deserve the recognition," Wells said. "They are saving the city a ton of money and helping to protect the dogs. It's a great gesture."

Marcal, whose organization raises funds for dogs throughout the United States, has vested 112 dogs (and counting) since 2009. In fact, the vest donated to Fox helped the organization surpass \$100,000 worth of funds collected and donated for K-9 vests.

She said she heard about Warwick's need through her network of contacts, as she has been independently vesting dogs for at least 12 years.

"It's definitely a priority in my book," Marcal said. "We work with a lot of great people and companies that have fundraising programs. It's a joint effort – I'm just the voice."

After \$1,006 is raised, said Marcal, they are able to purchase a vest. From there, officers measure their dogs and send the non-profit the information. Marcal then orders the custom-made vests.

To raise funds, the organization holds a variety of events from bike runs to jewelry exhibits, and also encourages online donations, which can be made at vik9s.org.

They also hook up with people like McKibben, whose musician friend gave her the idea to start HeatherFest.

"I love blues and a friend of mine is a blues musician and said, "This is a great place for a party. You throw the party and I'll play,"" she said of her home, which was built on 3.5 acres of land.

The event originally kicked off with just one band performing and 30 people in attendance more than 18 years ago. These days, McKibben said, seven to nine bands perform, with anywhere from 850 to 1,000 guests.

"It just started getting bigger and bigger and it took on a life of its own," she said. "The musicians love to play the event. Some of them play for free."

In time, she began asking guests for donations. She has made contributions to various causes, including animal shelters, food pantries and other efforts close to her heart.

"I just love fundraising," she said. "There are guys coming in tomorrow to put another half-acre of lawn in just so we have space for more people."

But the charity for the WPD doesn't end there. Steere and Wells said they are grateful to local entities, such as schools, businesses, even personal property owners, for allowing them to train their K-9s in a variety of atmospheres at no cost. The ACI is on the top of that list.

"We've been training there for five months and they haven't charged us a dime," Steere said. "It's been all free of charge to the city."

Having the opportunity to train the animals in different places, said Wells, is key. If they train a dog in the same building every day, it's going to be useless in terms of being an officer.

"You need to get him in so many different environments to make him a better dog," Wells said. "You've got to be able to test everything."

While they didn't tout it, Steere and Wells also had a hand in saving the WPD a substantial amount of money. The two worked diligently to secure a \$9,000 grant during the winter that allowed them to purchase one dog. The second dog, as well as equipment, was made possible through the acquisition of drug money.

"I don't think the city had to pay for anything," Wells said.

The K-9s are both 2 years old and were purchased from Connecticut Canine Services. Steere and Wells are thrilled to have the dogs on board, as the department hasn't had K-9s for nearly three years because the former handler retired.

That all changed in 2012. Each year, the department composes a list of goals and objectives, with officers sending their ideas via email to the patrol captain who submits them up to the ranks.

The last few years, Steere and Wells submitted proposals in attempts to reinstate the K-9 program.

"This time, there was more of a palate for it and we met with Major Ray Gallucci, who has been a big proponent of the program, and took our ideas, meshed them together and worked it out," Steere said.

The dogs are essential to the department during serious crimes, such as drug busts, because they have the capabilities of sniffing out narcotics, including marijuana, heroin, crack and power cocaine, and methamphetamine.

They also respond to more threatening situations, like tracking in the woods for an armed suspect.

"The odds of the dogs running into a situation where they are going to be harmed is elevated," Steere said, noting the importance of having them vested.

The acquisition of the K-9s also made history for the WPD, as Steere, a member of the SWAT team, is the first SWAT member to handle a dog within the department.

But the dogs are not only officers; they are also pets, as Steere and Wells are responsible for taking the dogs home with them every day.

For Steere, who has two children, Viking is a nice addition to the family. But Steere and Wells both agreed it's important to remember the animals are weapons.

"You always have to keep in the back of your mind, 'This dog is trained to do things that can be dangerous,'" Steere said.

Wells agreed, yet said both dogs are sociable, plus willing to do the "dirty work."

"It's a hard mix to get," Wells said. "But we lucked out with these two dogs. It's nice to know that they can turn the switch on and turn it off."